

Urban morphology identity: reading colonial legacies at Azemmour, Morocco

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Azemmour is a small town on the mouth of river Oum er-Rbia in Morocco. Its present size doesn't match the magnitude and importance of its past, especially as far as architectural and urban aspects are concerned. This paper examines one of its thinnest layers, yet extremely relevant: the Portuguese occupation (1513 to 1542). Azemmour makes part of an historical Portuguese settling process that comprised several towns in Northern Africa from 1415 till 1769, date of the evacuation of the last possession: Mazagão. However, the beginning of the 16th century stands out the most important period of urban and military activity.

This paper belongs to a broader research project called «Portugal and South Morocco: Contacts and Clashes» and summarizes results coming out of archaeological and architectonic research missions in site, in partnership with the Direction Régional de la Culture - Doukkala-Abda, in Morocco.

Azemmour suffered intense processes of urban growth and shortening for nearly one thousand years. After its Almohad heyday, when the city occupied a large area, the perimeter was drastically shortened before the arrival of the

Portuguese. To understand the urban developments of this medina, one needs to attentively observe the system that conveys its notion of closure, meaning the walls. Morphological characterization of its components suggests three phases of evolution, the third being the Portuguese period.

Both aerial views and the survey of the remaining ruins help draw a large round perimeter encircling which is nowadays an extended portion of the extramural town, passing by Sidi Bou Chaib mausoleum, a memorial place logically placed outside then. Moreover, 20th century cartography, together with ancient photography, proves the existence of a huge Islamic gate next to today's Gate of Almedina, the most important access to the former walled contour at that time.

A second Islamic phase reduced the former surface to a rectangle, known today as medina or the historical heart of Azemmour. This new wall was punctuated by several square towers matching the same typology still present in its the western side.

Actually, the present location of the main mosque of this shortened medina suggests a reflexion over pre-determined geometry reasoning since the virtual lines linking opposite extremities of the walled perimeter cross exactly at the mosque's door. Even though, urban regular geometries should be interpreted with extreme caution. This spot originates circles that touch or define relevant points of the wall, thus inferring new interpretative hypotheses and ways of research for macro-spatial relationships in Islamic context.

So, when the Portuguese arrived, the city was considerably smaller than the primitive, circular-shaped Almohad area. The collapse of this dynasty's maritime

advancement and the tendency to lose dynamism in urban centers of the Marinid period would have caused the city's downfall, walled in later periods, but with much smaller dimensions. Georg Braun's image shows an urban wall interrupted by several towers, and a city in which several minarets of the mosques can be observed. This would represent Azemmour's features shortly before the Portuguese arrival, approximately containing the same nine hectares of the current Medina. Upon the conquest in 1513, Christian occupants then decided another surface short cut to the size of a castle/town. This procedure was known as "atalho" and it was applied to all Portuguese conquests in Northern Africa where existing Islamic cities were shrank due to military sustainability issues. Showing a deeply rational spirit, this technique led to a radical analysis of the appropriated cities, regularizing them geometrically, putting them closer to the maritime channel and re-evaluating their internal disposition.

Through urban fabric analysis and resulting from recent field research, this paper wishes to state how the narrow Portuguese stratum, has marked the urban image of the town at a time when urban concepts and practices were being modernized through the experience with the founding of medieval new towns and the renovating hygienist spirit underlying an announced modernity in Europe. The search of a new identity related to a new lord and faith has induced strategies of regularization, now subordinated by a permanent re-Islamization process.

From the elongated shape along the river, the Portuguese decided to keep only its north side, transforming Azemmour into a "vila/town" or "castelo/castle" (due

to its small urban size) which today corresponds to the Kasbah/Mellah neighborhood. Military architecture played a fundamental role, being wall curtains and bastions geometrically disposed in order to create an efficient defense system and a homogeneous safe area around them, targeted through fire.

Plans for establishing a town inside the new castle soon gained consistence as its inner surface was large enough to accommodate an estimated number of 1000 inhabitants. In 1516, Captain Simão Correia proposes an urban plan where attention was called upon street display, embracing Manueline focus on public space. Letters exchanged between the captain and the crown insist in the building of new houses inside the castle, called “new town”, whereas the built areas excluded by the *atalho* operation should be demolished and the “old town” erased. The Portuguese quadrangle was described as “empty, with nothing there”, except for the two main equipments - the formers Kasbah and the mosque consecrated to church – both apparently isolated. All these signs, together with the use of terms such as “arruar” or “calçar”, suggest an urban plan similar to a new town’s model (like the *bastide*).

First impressions on Azemmour’s Kasbah neighborhood, the former Portuguese town inside the castle, reveal huge housing jams organized around patios. The Portuguese main street and axis, then *Rua Direita* and now *Derb Mellah*, part of *Derb Kasbah* plus *Derb Touamia* or *Derb Souika* alone, still assures the accessibilities to those assemblages. However, taking into account the changes caused by centuries of Islamic occupation that followed the Portuguese presence meanwhile, an attentive examination of the fabric plots can point other directions. In fact, the remaining of some empty canals among houses, as well

as the obstruction of passages by long shaped constructions, indicate traces of former streets. By cleaning the plan of those obstacles, it is possible to recover the original town planning and, therefore, a series of long rectangular shaped blocks.

Already in 1516 around 81 houses were under construction, most probably between the uptown area around the church and downtown riverside cluster around the exchequer and customs. The two most regular and central blocks, the one sided by the church and its western neighbor between Derbs Touamia and Sidi ben Abdallah, show propensity to standard measures around 30 brasses for the long side and 10 for the top side. Going down, the rectangle module seems to adjust itself to a more challenging topography whereas more distant blocks from the urban core favor a less geometrized fabric due a later Islamic occupation.

Moreover, and even though Azemmour's built environment has been completely renovated, an architectural survey of houses still shows how the central area remains the most ancient as it was most likely to be renovated in first place by an Arab and Jewish presence. Urban morphology methodologies allow retrospective keys to the reading of an important urban clash occurred in the early 1500s. Less than three decades of Portuguese presence in Azemmour were enough for the establishment of instruments of regular urbanism that still mark the city's present dimension and street display more than four and a half centuries after the Islamic reoccupation.

This idea seems even more consistent if one compares the former Portuguese castle/town to the rest of the Medina. Reconstructed several times, the Medina is structured with a street layout in accordance to a hierarchical network. From

main streets to dead ends leading to each house, Islamic urban culture is significantly more related to social aspects of private life, determined by Muslim laws, than to geometrical questions of regularity. The comparison with the current Kasbah/Mellah district, where the afterwards Jewish settlement helped preserve its urban aspect, makes this evident.

In the Medina area, one can still observe the application of Islamic law rules referring to medieval traditions. The concept of *fina'* is a key element, an open space surrounding or bordering a certain household whose usage is given to the owner. By other words, the *fina'* translates into a daily practice of preferable loading, unloading or animal tying and parking by the owner, meaning a virtual extension of the house towards the public space. Therefore, the effective use of *fina'* contributed to narrowing lanes and making these canals look winding. The reverse projection of this urban right of usage to the upper floor led to the building of *sabat*, meaning superior passages over streets. These are much more present in the Medina area than in the former Christian town area, meaning how Portuguese initial layout has lasted.

This urban stratum enlightens the intentions of 1516 which would establish six quadrangular blocks in Azemmour. The imposed rationality finds similarities with Asilah as far as central units are concerned, where length measures are also close. From the resemblances between Asilah and Azemmour, it is possible to point out logics of intervention that surpass, not only the geographical field of each action, but also the agents concerned. Therefore, the concepts involved in both towns walk along the tradition of drawing and building *bastides* in late medieval Europe.

Therefore, we believe that the foundation of the fortress-town of Mazagão in 1541 must be read as the summit of an urban tradition centered in the first half of the 16th century. Although Mazagão represents an epistemological severance with the preceding military architecture, one remarks that the motivation for its layout is a compromise with (still) the urban tradition developed in the previous examples of occupation by conquest. Asilah and Azemmour become pertinent because of their location both in the northern and southern groups of Portuguese settlements in present Morocco, thus indicating that neither the proximity of other experiences, nor the presence of different master-builders, prevented the emergence of urban concepts and models from evolving and circulating.

For Azemmour, 1542's Arab takeover returns to the former perimeter, which corresponds to the walled medina nowadays. The re-occupation of the Portuguese erased part of the medina, as well as the ever since growing towards the Muslim mausoleum and landmark, seems to recover the whole surface of Azemmour's huge first medieval area. For a retrospective reading of Azemmour's urban morphology, dual concepts, such as colonial vs. autochthonous, Christian vs. Muslim urban images or even regular vs. organic, should always be present.